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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 001079

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STATE FOR AF/W
STATE FOR INR/AA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV NI

SUBJECT: HEAD OF NORTHERN ELDERS SAYS PRESIDENCY WILL GO TO DARKHORSE CANDIDATE

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. During a July 26 conversation with the Consul General (CG), former presidential aspirant and current head of the Northern Union, Dr. Abubakar Olusola Saraki, said President Obasanjo still pined to remain in office and thus was not sincerely shopping for a successor. In this vein, Saraki predicted Obasanjo would go to nearly any length to deracinate Vice-President Atiku's presidential ambitions. Saraki foresaw the 2007 People's Democratic Party (PDP) nomination going to a member of the northern political elite -- a dark horse candidate without prior military experience -- preferably Saraki himself. End Summary.

Obasanjo Seeking to Remain in Power; No Chosen Successor

¶2. (C) During a July 26 conversation with us, Olusola Saraki described President Obasanjo as not genuinely interested in finding a successor. Rather, the usually decisive Obasanjo was being purposefully dilatory in selecting a successor. Obasanjo wanted the situation to remain fluid in hopes that things would ultimately congeal in his favor, i.e. to allow him to extend his tenure, opined Saraki. Obasanjo was awaiting the opportune moment to call a state of emergency, or otherwise cancel elections to extend his stay in the Presidential Villa, warned Saraki.

¶3. (C) Saraki considered Obasanjo's continued obsession with remaining in power as counterproductive folly. The more Obasanjo struggled, the farther he would stink politically, thus lessening his ability to influence the inevitable -- the naming of a successor. Saraki predicted Obasanjo's successor would be a dark horse candidate from the North with no prior military background. In Saraki's view, Ibrahim Babangida (IBB), Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, Muhammadu Buhari, and Buba Marwa were bete noire. When asked about potential State Governors that Obasanjo would endorse, Saraki said Obasanjo told him "the state governors have failed him," and Obasanjo could only trust five governors: Kwara Governor Saraki (the Doctor's son), Cross Rivers Governor Duke, Ogun Governor Daniel, Rivers Governor Odili, and surprisingly Imo Governor Udenwa. Saraki asserted his own son was too inexperienced to contest for the Presidency, and the other four could not get the blessing of northern leaders to take the Presidency.

¶4. (C) As for Vice-Presidential candidates, Saraki thought the likely candidate would come from the Southeast. He claimed the South-South was too divided and too ethnically heterogeneous to produce a Vice-Presidential candidate, while the Igbo's would support en masse one of their own from the

Southeast.

PDP in Disarray; UDA To Challenge Obasanjo

¶ 15. (C) In a conversation with the President during Obasanjo's recent visit to Kwara State, Saraki cautioned the President to unite the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and country by supporting a northern candidate. He told Obasanjo that PDP National Chairman Ahmadu Ali's vitriolic statements were undermining PDP reconciliation efforts, and it behooved the President to remove Ali.

¶ 16. (C) Some opposition candidates planned to coalesce under the banner of a new political party, the United Democratic Alliance (UDA), which Saraki said would register in coming weeks. According to him, Atiku, Lagos Governor Tinubu, and possibly IBB might join hands under the UDA, but Buhari has backed out. Saraki did not believe, however, the UDA would succeed because it would not have the backing of the core Northern establishment and because Obasanjo was already clipping the financial wings of VP Atiku.

Obasanjo Using Transcorp to Push His Agenda

¶ 17. (C) Saraki lamented Obasanjo's inability to unite the country, and his failure to focus on social and economic issues. He knocked Transnational Corporation of Nigeria (Transcorp) for being an artifice to enrich Obasanjo. Saraki claimed Obasanjo, through numerous proxies, owned a majority stake in Transcorp.

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Comment

¶ 18. (C) As head of the Northern Union, Saraki is an old school northern politician seeking to return national political power to a member of this club. In other words, he wants to put new wine in an old bottle. His Northern Union is just one of the many regional/ethnic political groupings trying to put their mark on the 2007 election. Most of these affiliations are parochial and unimaginative in their outlook. If Saraki epitomizes the Union, then it unfortunately is not an exception to the above mentioned generality about regional groupings. End comment.

BROWNE